

## **Migrant Head Start Issues**

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**Presenters:** Sandra Barrueco, Robert W. O'Brien, Barbara Ryan, Cassandra Simmel

- **Developing and Improving Multisystemic Interventions With Migrant Preschoolers, Families, and Head Start Programs**  
Sandra Barrueco
- **Bringing Families Into Head Start**  
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- **Learning from Migrant Head Start Families: An Exploratory Look at the Research Process in Migrant Head Start Programs**  
Cassandra Simmel

**Capello:** The Migrant and Seasonal Head Start Research Development Project is a complex, collaborative project, sponsored by the Office of Planning and Research and Evaluation at the Department of Health and Human Services.

Data collection for the Migrant and Seasonal Head Start Research Development Project was completed over a year ago, but the final report has not been written. Data were collected from over 200 families in six different sites. The Migrant Head Start program began in the late 1960's, a few years after the traditional Head Start program began. In the late 1990's, due to legislative changes, the program was expanded to include seasonal farm working families. It currently serves approximately 32,000 children and families. This is a fifth of the number of families and children who are eligible to be in the migrant and seasonal Head Start. In planning research projects and planning evaluations of migrant Head Start programs, it is important to understand the kinds of families who will be involved with the programs.

There are three different migrating streams in this country: Western, Midwestern, and the East Coast. There are no strict boundaries around these streams. There can be some flow back and forth between them. In the Western stream the typical farm working pattern, or the migration pattern, is a farm working family coming from their home base in Mexico, or another Central American country, and then going to just one location on the West Coast. Perhaps it is Watsonville in California, or to an apple orchard in Washington State. They would work there for a large part of the season, or for that particular season, and then return to their home base. They would probably not travel much among different areas on the West Coast.

There are more of the prototypical migration patterns in the Midwestern and East Coast streams versus the West Coast stream. Families might start off in one of the down stream sites, such as Texas or Florida and traveling northward to one, two, or three more locations and returning to the down stream site at the end of the season. As a result, the programs must be flexible to maximally serve families during these short stays.

There are risk factors that are inherent to this population including academic and school readiness difficulties. The rates of high school graduation for migrant children are low. The poorest and most under-served families in this country are in the migrant population. Their access to services is low, whether they are part of a Head Start program or not. They are not aware of the services they are eligible for, they do not know how to get connected to the services, and there may be a great deal of fear about how to get connected to services.

There are also some unique demographic factors that could serve as buffering affects for some of these risks. There is a high percentage of two parent families and the presence of many extended family members. It is not unusual to see children traveling with a mother and father, aunts and uncles, and grandparents.

More research is needed on the migrant population. The amount of research that has been done is nowhere near what has been done in the mainstream Head Start programs. But yet, there are recent changes (federal mandates) in which the National Reporting System is requiring that assessments be done. That underscores the need for researchers to use the most effective tools to measure children's school readiness, bilingual language development, cognitive skills, and socio-emotional functioning.

This project was more than a 2-year project. It was developed and seen as the first generation of several projects to come. It was to get an overview to ascertain what the current state of knowledge was in migrant and seasonal Head Start programs using different methods and tools in order to understand what works well with these families as well as with the programs. The tremendous logistical issues and the timing of trying to carry out when and how someone would evaluate a program, particularly when families are migrating and traveling, needed to be understood. Many pieces needed to fall into place to understand the numerous cultural issues of doing research with families and with programs who, in comparison to other Head Start programs, may have never previously been part of a research project. The participants were often fearful of being involved in that kind of process.

Data were collected in three down stream sites. They were Texas, Florida, and California. Almost 80 families from the Texas and Florida sites were tracked. Once the sites were determined, preliminary visits were done ahead of time to try and build a relationship with the program. Getting the programs involved was key along with getting them to understand that everyone must work as part of the team in a collaboration. Researchers were not going to evaluate them and show what things were going wrong. A working relationship was developed with staff people who could serve as site liaisons. Instead, researchers would work with the families, help answer questions, and be a spokesperson for the project. A central component in the site visits was being able to attend parent meetings where the project could be discussed openly with the families.

A large number of the families did not want to sign the consent form because they were afraid of the complicated language reflecting mandatory reporting of child abuse. The site liaison and other program people explained to the families that this mandate already exists in the programs. The parents expressed their trusts of the programs and were willing to sign the

consent forms. This underscores how important it is to get the programs involved in the research.

During the assessments and the interviews, data were collected from the teachers, other center staff, and families. Focus groups were held afterwards, where they were asked to talk about what it meant to be part of a project, what was comfortable for them, and what made them uneasy. The result was valuable information about what was problematic and what worked well for them. For example, parents were confused regarding the translated depression questionnaire. This would require changes in future research.

It is important to remember that the teachers were involved, and they are connected with this community. Many of them come from migrant farm work families, are former migrant farm workers, or they are devoted to the community. Researchers are often viewed as outsiders who are not familiar with the community. That is why it is so essential that the interviewers be bilingual and experienced with the migrant farm work community in order to develop trust and rapport.

Parents had the most exhausting schedules, but they always were sincerely and enthusiastically involved. They liked to respond to the questions and they liked to tell stories; however, they did not like the forced choice responses. They particularly could not do the Likert scale, which asked them to rank something from one to ten, or one to five, or one to three. It became a painful process for the interviewer and the interviewee. There were some mental health and substance abuse questions that were also too sensitive. Those questions were later changed.

Of the several hundred families that were worked with, about 80 families were tracked. The tracking started with the Florida and Texas sites, and ended up going to North Carolina and North Dakota. Intensive interviews were planned for 18 of the 80 families. A multimethod approach was used with these families. They were asked to fill out a grid so they could predict what their migrating plans would be for the subsequent 6 months. They were also asked to fill out post cards and to furnish the name of a contact person who would always know their whereabouts. There are databases that show that some of the streams and programs are much more connected than others. Sometimes the databases were not up-to-date. It was known where the families were supposed to be going, but if the families did not go there, that information never got changed in the databases.

It was possible to locate 71 out of 79 families and conduct 17 out of 18 follow-up interviews. The most effective way of finding the families is word of mouth. The center directors know these families well. The second best method was using the grid. Interestingly, what did not work was using the postcards. Only seven out of the 79 families ever mailed back postcards.

**Barruecco:** Various estimates indicate that there may be anywhere from 1 to 5 million migrant workers. Most recent estimates are 1.6 million. The largest populations are in California, Texas and North Carolina. The average income is about \$6,000. Education levels hover around 6th grade. Approximately one to two percent speak English fluently.

Estimates from the United States Department of Labor say that 85% of migrant farm workers struggle to glean information from the printed word. In 2000 Ezell and Allen did a Head Start study to determine the best predictors of children's language and literacy competency. This turned out to be the home literacy environment. The parent's language and literacy best predicted the children's capabilities beyond Head Start's contribution.

About half of migrant farm workers drop out of high school or never get to high school because there is a push for the children and adolescents to start supporting the family and to work in the fields. The interaction of parents and children relative to language and literacy is important.

The EMHS Project serves 8,000 children along the Eastern seaboard, between Florida and Maine. Three years ago literacy areas were identified as weak among Head Start programs. A program called East Coast Collaborative for Enhancing Language and Literacy (ECCEL) was developed. It is a promising collaboration between Head Start and Even Start and has been well received by parent, teachers and families. It is being implemented with between 40% and 80% of the families with a goal of 100% of the families in the next year.

In the selected programs, Creative Curriculum was already being used. Analyses showed that some of the language and literacy activities in the classroom were weak. Building Language for Literacy was brought into the program. It is a program co-authored by Catherine Snow. It has evidence that the program advances language and literacy, at least for English monolingual children. IT had never been used with Spanish-speaking children or bilingual children. It has songs and books, and it adds about an hour of focus on language and literacy.

In terms of parenting education, the home visits were strengthened. The teachers and family service coordinators taught parenting and behavioral management, and conducted small group activities as well. Electronic products for English learning were provided. Resources for the classrooms and parents to engage their children in language and literacy were purchased using literacy backpacks. These backpacks have books in them, but also toys and items that parents may use to engage their children. A lending library was put in place so parents may borrow books, or teachers can send home books on a more regular basis.

A big part of staff training has been to improve what the staff knows about language and literacy development, especially around language minority children. In terms of the library, some of the parents were reading at home, or at least sitting down with the books, but they wanted more books in Spanish.

At first there was resistance from the teachers about incorporating a new curriculum, or a change to their curriculum. After their first engagement, they found that it was helpful. They gave good examples of how it was increasing vocabulary. There were some differences between North Carolina and Florida. In North Carolina the children are there for about 4 to 6 weeks. In Florida they are there for 6 months.

Migrant farm workers are an incredibly engaging population. The kind of turn out at the parent focus groups was tremendous. Participants initiated a great number of ideas, in terms

of the formative evaluation techniques. They were engaged and empowered, and felt part of the research and the intervention. This strengthened their communication. It has been interesting doing a project where socio-cultural-historical issues are happening simultaneously.

**O'Brien:** This project was funded by ACF about 5 or 6 years ago. The primary source of data comes from focus groups. There were focus groups with field staff, administrative staff, and parents on recruitment and enrollment. There were site liaisons who were often family service workers, who helped identify people through other families or from lists that they had from earlier recruitment efforts.

Interviews were done with community agency representatives. There was some information from existing data sources that applied. The objective was to get the field staff to be able to communicate what they were doing out in the field without any fear of breaking the rules. The information from the field staff was not shared with the administrative staff.

The focus groups found that recruitment was an on-going process. The field staff was doing this all year round, whether it was through contacts with the families that they had, or whether it was a formal recruitment event that the program set up. The most intense periods were during the late spring and early summer, as they were preparing for the fall year. Staff tended to focus on low-income areas near the centers and on the most needy families.

The field and administrative staffs were consistently frustrated because of restrictions in terms of recruitment having to do with poverty guidelines. The frustration was in finding families who needed services, but were not eligible because they had more income than the guidelines called for. The families were losing eligibility for services instead of gaining more income. These families became, at least in the eyes of the Head Start staff, even more needy than they had been before.

The staff also talked about the importance of matching the cultural background of the recruitment staff with potential enrollees, but admitted that the only true matching they did was to find people able to speak the language, or help translate. Many programs told us that they had trouble finding full-time staff members who were able to be a cultural match for some of the families they were trying to target, and in turn, that made recruitment difficult.

There was no consistent enrollment. In many sites, including those with little or no waiting lists, pockets of eligible, but unserved children, could be identified. There were instances where children were identified as being eligible for services, but in some cases these were places, not names. There were families living in a swamp and the staff was fearful to go there. It became a safety issue.

All the programs that were visited employed some combination of risk factors to prioritize. The main eligibility factors that were found included child age, family status, number of parents in the household, different kinds of caregivers, high number of siblings, age of parent, ethnic minority, and non-English speaking family. There are different categories that certain programs were looking for. Some were looking for health or disabilities among children and

families. They identified specific risk factors, such as referrals from other agencies, stressful family or personal situations, physical abuse or neglect, alcohol or other substance abuse, child socialization needs, or developmental concerns, and placing the children from the home into some kind of educational environment.

The requirements to meet full enrollment by a certain date sometimes precluded staff from enrolling the most needy families. Certain programs wanted to have full enrollment by the beginning or the middle of summer. Staff was taking families who were eligible but may not have needed the services. What they found was that, sometimes, the families who got into Head Start were the families who had enough information to come and fill out the enrollment information, and were able to pull together financial records to show that they were eligible. The process was leaving out families that needed the services, but could not pull the information together. The staff felt that often they did not have time to work with those families.

Many Head Start staffers focused on what the family needs, beyond income. There are many important things in terms of helping people get jobs, education, and teaching them how to manage finances.

The five main family typologies that emerged were families that frequently moved, families with problematic situations or inadequate coping skills, families with service needs not met by Head Start program options, families unwilling to separate from their young children, and families that lacked transportation.

A proper approach is to have people addressing the fact that Head Start is all about the family, and the child is a part of that family. Families with low literacy levels, who are highly motivated and committed, provide an opportunity to do this kind of project.

**Ryan:** The most difficult part is identifying the implications for improving the quality of services, as well as directions for future research. North Carolina has an average of 6 weeks of services. Florida's average is longer. The implication for policy makers is that Head Start Performance Standards need to be adjusted to take into account a program that does not operate for that many months. It was suggested that there be a research project that tracks children from Texas, Florida, and California to the states they go to, using Creative Curriculum, and then measuring the outcomes.

A better job needs to be done of picking up where the previous program left off. Every program worries about their own reviews and their own accountability. That is why they are not always willing to accept what somebody else has already done.

The implications in recruitment and enrollment of families are that the person who comes to the house has to be someone that the participants are going to trust. The results of this research should be taken to congressional leaders so there can be talk about the kinds of adjustments that need to be made.

The research on language needs to be up to date. The English as a second language participants want books in Spanish, and they should learn their own language first. I feel that research proves that, but school systems do not accept that. They often test them in English and label their ability levels too soon.

Research needs to be done to address the new immigrant populations who are so desperately in need of care. Practitioners approve of researchers helping them and want to encourage research because it is truly an immigrant population that needs to benefit from the research.